

Airman 1st Class Kirshell LaCroix arrives at the 158th Fighter Wing at Burlington International Airport to work with members of the Vermont Air National Guard. The F-16 electrical environmental apprentice from New Orleans is one of 12 active-duty Airmen participating in the Air Force's community-basing program.

The Green Mountain Boys

New Program Combines Total Force

Community provides a home, Guard unit provides the mission

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Airman 1st Class Kirshell LaCroix considers herself a "Green Mountain Boy," a Vermont Air National Guard moniker, despite not being a Guardsman, or from Vermont, or being a quarter of a century younger than most people in the unit. In fact, she's becoming one of the more well-known Green Mountain Boys, especially after arriving there last summer as part of a test phase of a new program called "community basing."

The program involves assigning active-duty members as an active associate unit to the Guard base, and the local community around Burlington, Vermont, provides the normal active-duty base support, not the military.

Active-duty associate Airmen based in Vermont are members of Detachment 1, 20th Maintenance Squadron, 20th Fighter Wing, Shaw Air Force Base, S.C.

For Airman LaCroix, that means she works as an electronic and

environmental maintainer for F-16 Fighting Falcons during the day, then relies on nearby Burlington for her creature comforts like billeting, eating and entertainment.

The program is the first of its kind in the Air Force. So far, everyone likes it, especially Airman LaCroix and the 11 other active-duty Airmen involved. If the program is approved and takes hold in other states, it may open up future possibilities for active-duty Airmen to volunteer for duty in states that don't have active-duty bases (See sidebar, Page 42).

Guinea pig

"Emotionally, it was all new to me," said Airman LaCroix. Being the first active-duty maintainer to arrive on station, she received rock star attention from everyone, including the media.

"I liked it," she said, "even though I didn't know what I was getting into."

Once the newness of the program wore off and she was given time to comprehend everything, she realized community basing was a good idea.

"After my friends heard about it, they wished they could be in the program, too," said the Airman who has been in the Air Force for one year.

While her friends stay in billeting and eat in base dining facilities, 20-year-old Airman LaCroix shares a two-bedroom suite with another Airman in an extended-stay hotel located just outside the base. They also receive extra money from the government to eat off base.

Six months into the program, and with packed snow on the frozen ground, the New Orleans native is still trying to get used to the cold. What didn't take her long to warm up to was accomplishing the operational mission.

Once she settled in, the Green Mountain Boys' experience began enveloping her like a warm Chinook wind.

Experience surrounds her

Most of the Air National Guard personnel in her shop have been aircraft maintainers longer than she's been alive, 20 to 30 years.

"Everybody in the shop trains me," Airman LaCroix said. "One will train me on a certain specialty that he's good at, while another will train me on something else."

Senior Master Sgt. Dwight Rolston has been a Green Mountain Boy avionics specialist for 18 years after spending time on active duty. He says the Guard has a lot to offer young Airmen.

"In this program, we can use our work experience," he said. "With a 30-year retirement, that's a lot of experience we can pass on to younger Airmen."

There have been exchange programs between active-duty and Guard Airmen, mostly involving pilots, but nothing to this extent. That is, until



Brig. Gen. William Etter, Vermont ANG assistant adjutant general for air, and his staff came up with the idea and presented it to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, who blessed it as a test in November 2004. By the summer of 2005, the first active-duty Airmen began arriving.

"This is another logical step during a time when we want the most capabilities with a restrained budget," said Maj. Gen. Martha Rainville, who in 1997 became the first woman adjutant general in the 260-year history of the National Guard. "We're leveraging Guard experience with the enthusiasm of our young Airmen. It will be good for the Guard, the Air Force and the nation."

The young active-duty Airmen are also changing the way the Green Mountain Boys think and operate, affecting a unit that has been around since 1946.

The ANG, as a whole, has never had a First Term Airmen's Center until the Vermont unit thought to create one before their newest members arrived. It proved to be such a success it's being incorporated around the nation.

From concept, planning, to execution, the Vermont ANG is a stickler for doing it right the first time, leaving nothing to chance. They say other

Full-time Vermont Air National Guardsman Chief Master Sgt. Leo Besaw, quality assurance superintendent, reviews aircraft forms with Airman 1st Class Stephen Shepard, 20th Maintenance Squadron crew chief.

Guard units should be able to look at the model they've built.

"We seek the advice of experts in everything we do," said Col. Steve Cray, Vermont ANG director of strategic plans and force development. "There is nothing ad hoc."

The Guard supervisors also have to learn the career development side of the active-duty force, which "is making us a better Guard unit, no doubt about it," the colonel said.

Even the Airmen themselves are making a change. They've formed an Airman's Council — again, something new for the Vermont ANG — and have dreams of growing.

"We want to expand it and make it a Junior Enlisted Association so we

Dorm-free dwelling

A majority of the first-term Airmen in the test phase of community basing like living off base, dorm-free, but some miss the dining hall.

"The living conditions are awesome," said Airman 1st Class Maranda Shaw, a 20-year-old avionics technician. "The rooms are nice and we get free cable and we have a swimming pool."

The Airmen live in an extended-stay hotel minutes from the base. In addition to free cable, they also get free use of the Internet, fitness equipment and a daily breakfast. Each room comes with its own bathroom, and two share an expansive living area that includes a full kitchen.

The hotel was picked for its strategic location to stores, malls, restaurants and

movie theaters.

Airman Shaw clips coupons and buys what's on sale to save money. She just doesn't care to cook.

"I'd prefer to go to a dining hall and get three square meals a day," she said. "I like to cook, but not all the time."

On the other hand, Airman 1st Class Shawn Nelson loves to cook — so much so that another Airman buys most of the food if he agrees to cook it.

"I don't have to wait for the dining hall," said the 20-year-old egress systems journeyman from Montana. "I can eat whenever I want."

Although they receive limited maid service to replenish supplies, the Airmen still have to clean their rooms and receive room inspections. But none seem to mind.

Airman 1st Class Cabe Feller (left) and Airman 1st Class Will Hodgkinson enjoy the comforts of hotel living. The 20th Maintenance Squadron crew chiefs live in an extended-stay hotel and get to enjoy many comforts that most first-term Airmen do not get in the dorm environment.

can include more E-5s and below from the Guard," said Senior Airman Richard Taylor, the council's principal organizer.

The test has yet to come

The Green Mountain Boys, including all of their newest members, will deploy this spring in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom — the ultimate test for community basing.

"I predict success," said 1st Lt. Adrian Meyer, the detachment commander. "It's what they've been practicing to do since the active-duty Airmen started showing up. In this first (deployment), they're all fired up."

Col. Phil Murdock, 158th Fighter Wing commander, said, "Once they've deployed with us, it will solidify the team concept. The goal here is to complement each other."

Program success

Less than a year into the program and many of the Green Mountain Boys are already calling community basing a success.

"When our seasoned veterans heard the new Airmen were coming, they jumped in with all four paws on the ground," said Col. Michael Morgan, the unit's maintenance commander. "There was no resistance. They've really taken them under their wing. Because most of our members are in their mid-40s and 50s, it's like (the young Airmen)



Senior Airman Alexis Maxfield, traditional Guard member, assists Airman 1st Class Stephen Shepard on top of an F-16 wing. The two crew chiefs are part of an initiative that leverages Guard experience with the young active-duty force — not just for training, but for mission success. The unit will ultimately test its efforts on its deployment this spring.

are working with aunts, uncles and a few long-lost cousins.” That feeling is not lost on Airman LaCroix. “I consider myself a Green Mountain Boy,” Airman LaCroix said. “It means being part of a family where they accept me and I accept them. Actually, that part came real easy.” For the first-term enlisted participants in community basing, the experience is entirely new. For active-duty Airmen with past Air Force experience, they must get accustomed to living without base support functions. For the Guard, its goal is not to change tried-and-true ways, but to adapt to better accommodate their active-duty counterparts. Success is achieved when everyone involved complements each other. And, according to all involved, that is already happening. 🦅

More stateside assignment possibilities

If the community basing concept catches hold, as many predict, it will open up more assignment possibilities for active-duty Airmen to states that traditionally don't have active-duty Air Force bases.

States with only Guard and Reserve bases, not active duty, include Oregon, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Maine, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York and Vermont.



First Lt. Matt Edson, Vermont Air National Guard F-16 pilot, prepares for a flight as his crew chief, Airman 1st Class Stephen Shepard, performs final checks on the aircraft.